



Impact of Workplace Changes on Employee Mental Health and Well-being

ORIGINAL ARTICLE



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Abstract

Organisations are becoming increasingly aware of the role employees play in achieving and maintaining a competitive advantage. The reality of modern work life is that individuals continually strive to balance their personal and professional lives. The issue of employee mental health and well-being is becoming increasingly crucial, both in terms of the economic costs to the organisation and the human costs to society. This study conducts a comprehensive literature review of the most recent research on workplace changes and their impact on employee mental health and well-being. The author has examined the changes modern workplace technology has brought about in how employees operate. Then, the paper highlights the flexible work arrangements made possible by advancements in technology and their positive and negative impact on employees' mental health and well-being. Finally, the study's practical implications are discussed in terms of present and future research directions.

Key Words

Workplace Changes, Mental Health, Employee Well-being, Technology, Flexible Work.

Introduction

The health and well-being of an individual have a direct impact on their performance and productivity at work. Stress, despair, and anxiety can harm work performance and increase absenteeism in working populations (Carolan et al., 2017). A person's level of well-being can be significantly impacted by stress, which can show up as a variety of symptoms, from emotional, including mood swings, becoming irritable, feeling tense, loneliness, and an inability to relax, as well as cognitive symptoms like difficulty concentrating, anxiety, and losing one's objectivity (Haddon, 2018). Although there is evidence that frequent mental health issues can be avoided and treated on the job, few working people actually seek out psychological therapy. Researchers have studied the role employment plays in promoting well-being for the past 30 years and how the workplace can aid in a person's rehabilitation from mental health issues (Modini et al., 2016). An increasing body of evidence backs up the idea that employment promotes long-term mental health and well-being (Modini et al., 2016; Waddell and Burton, 2016). Whether they are physical, emotional, mental, or social in character, a person's experiences at work undoubtedly have an impact on them. Additionally, these encounters spill over into non-work situations (Danna & Griffin, 1999). Common mental health disorders, most notably depression and anxiety, are now

acknowledged as the leading causes of sick leave and long-term work disability in most developed nations. The majority of common mental health conditions are curable and, in some instances, preventable. Depression and anxiety continue to have a large negative impact on individuals, employers, and society.

The paper first examines the body of research on the state of mental health in the workplace and its recent developments. Then it discusses the significance of taking mental health into account when discussing the future of employment. The author highlights two major workplace changes: technology and flexible work arrangements, and their harmful effects on mental health. The first issue is how automation and cutting-edge technology, like artificial intelligence, are transforming the workplace and how we do our jobs. The second concern is a rise in flexible work schedules made possible by telecommunications technology advancements and how they influence where and when we work. The paper evaluates these developments and speculates on the potential implications for mental health.

Mental Health and Wellbeing

Mental health is “a state of well-being in which each individual realises his or her own potential, can cope with everyday stresses, can work productively and fruitfully, and can make a contribution to his or her community” (World Health Organisation, 2007). Given that most people spend around a third of their waking hours at work, a person’s work is likely to have a significant impact on their overall physical and emotional well-being (Johnson et al., 2020). Some of the most stigmatised and marginalised groups in the workplace are those with poor mental health and the carers who provide for them. In both Europe and the United States, almost one in three employees claims that their work-related stress affects them. Reduced productivity and absenteeism brought on by job stress, despair, and anxiety are thought to cost the economy between 3% and 4% of its gross domestic product (as cited by Carolan et al., 2017). In fact, long-term disability and workers’ compensation claims are now most frequently brought about by mental illness (Harvey et al., 2017). To address this complex problem, governments, organisations, and policymakers are seeking both intellectual guidance and practical solutions. There is a sizable corpus of scholarly research that examines workplace mental health risk factors and associated interventions (Harvey et al., 2017).

Changing Nature of Work

The nature of work has changed dramatically over the final four decades of the 20th century. New technology, especially the use of computers, entered the workplace during the 1960s and 1970s. Following this, there was a significant change towards globalisation in the 1980s, which saw numerous organisations go through mergers, acquisitions, strategic alliances, and privatisations. For the nations that embraced this entrepreneurial era, it led to a rise in economic competitiveness in global markets. A significant restructuring of the labour market began in the 1990s. Organisations in recession-hit nations were cutting staff or postponing projects in an attempt to stay alive. In order to effectively compete in the fiercely competitive global market, this trend of restructuring and downsizing has persisted over the past ten years in many organisations, along with an increase in subcontracting and outsourcing. Other changes include a shift towards a more flexible workforce in terms of the number of workers and the skills and functions they perform, as well as new working patterns like teleworking, self-regulated work, and teamwork (Cox et al., 2000). Increased female labour force participation has been observed in many nations, which has led to an increase in part-time employment, dual-earner couples, and an overall rise in the proportion of older employees. Massive socioeconomic and technological changes have been happening in recent times, resulting in a significant impact on the workplace. They are frequently referred to as “the changing world of employment” as a whole (Cox et al., 2000).

Technology Affecting Mental Health and Wellbeing

Significant technological advancements in the last few decades include those in robotics, digitization, machine learning, artificial intelligence, and other fields (Makridakis, 2017). Now, many difficult works can be

easily done with automation and robotics (Frank et al., 2019). Technology advancements have altered both the types of work that can be done and the jobs that are accessible to us. Jobs today is more mentally demanding, service-focused, and complex. Nowadays, a sizable percentage of employees either work in the service industry or as knowledge workers (Johnson et al., 2020). With the help of technological advancements, the workforce can now quickly complete routine cognitive tasks, such as data analysis, offer services in-person or remotely, like remote education, and engage in dynamic collaborations with people or teams in other time zones around the globe. Technology advancements also mean that work duties and responsibilities are frequently revised, leading to higher expectations for employees to keep up with or pick up new skills for various roles throughout their careers.

Typically, workplace technology is created to boost output and enhance organisational outcomes, with little thought given to the effect on workers. For instance, the pervasive use of technology can result in a “norm of responsiveness” that has been associated with increased perceptions of demands, exaggerated standards for performance and productivity, and feelings of increased mental fatigue. ICT, for instance, can improve employees’ performance efficiency by enhancing their capacity to communicate with other organisational members and improve employees’ ability to solve issues by increasing their access to information. But because ICT makes the workplace more accessible to employees and raises productivity expectations, it can also result in more demands being made on workers. These ICT-related requirements may negatively impact employees’ job experiences and cause additional issues for workers, for example, poor mental health and well-being.

Although ICT was designed to be labour-saving, excessive work may be made possible, which would increase the burden and stress on workers. The widespread use of technology at work is also associated with an increase in screen time and sedentary workplace behaviour (Yang et al., 2017), which has been linked to worse physical health outcomes, such as a higher risk of developing physical health issues like diabetes, heart and cardiovascular disease, musculoskeletal disorders, and obesity, often in conjunction with concurrent mental health issues. Long-term screen use and idle work habits have also been related to mental health problems, such as a rise in self-reported symptoms of depression and anxiety.

Employee resistance to workplace technological change is frequently caused by concerns that artificial intelligence technologies, like driverless cars and retail self-checkouts, will create services that replace specific job functions. Another common concern is that employees may not have the skills necessary for the jobs of the future, which may be made worse by an ageing workforce. Higher levels of depression and cynicism, as well as state and trait anxiety, are reported by workers who think that smart technology, artificial intelligence, robotics, and algorithms could replace their jobs (Brougham and Haar, 2018). In a similar vein, recent research discovered that workers who thought technological change threatened their job security also admitted to having more anxiety-related mental health issues (McClure, 2018). Overall, technology is having a detrimental impact on mental health at work in a number of ways, including raising demands, cutting back on resources, and altering how workers perceive the future, all of which have direct and indirect costs for both employers and employees.

Flexible Working or Work from Home Affecting Mental Health

Flexible working refers to working from home or any other place outside of the office using technology (Spreitzer et al., 2017). Work from home became popular in the early 2000s as telecommuting technologies advanced and allowed employees to avoid commuting, offer greater scheduling freedom, and achieve a better work-life balance (Bouziri et al., 2020). Many employees were directed to work full-time during the COVID-19 pandemic, which redefined the traditional idea of working from home that was typical only for specific kinds of work, on occasion, or given specific employee circumstances. In the management literature, flexible working is frequently presented as a win-win situation where both the employer and employee benefit from having a more productive workforce that requires less space and costs less to the house (Bloom et al., 2015).

This prevalent view of flexible work, however, overlooks potential drawbacks like inadequate recovery from work at home, disruption of social connections, and isolation (Bloom et al., 2015). The well-being of workers may be significantly impacted by flexible working.

Flexible workers might find it difficult to mentally switch off from their jobs during downtime, even though they are physically separated from coworkers and the workplace (Johnson et al., 2020). ICT use at home has been linked to poor sleep quality, quantity, and consistency. However, this effect was only observed in people who did not set limits for their use of work-related technology at home. Working from home can lessen the usual benefits of being at home for cognitive, emotional, and physical rest.

Working from home can make it harder to build lasting relationships with coworkers, which can worsen existing social relationships at work and contribute to feelings of social isolation and loneliness. Employees who perceive greater levels of workplace exclusion typically have lower levels of well-being and higher levels of distress. Chronic stress is also brought on by feelings of loneliness, which are also linked to poorer sleep, dysphoria, melancholy, and anxiety (Campione, 2008). Additionally, as a result of working from home, the roles of the two places, i.e workplace and personal, are more conflicting (Butts et al., 2015). The employees have to respond to emails even outside work time, which has been linked to higher levels of negative feelings, such as anger, and a rise in work-family conflict (Butts et al., 2015). Furthermore, Xiao et al. (2021) found that the general physical and mental health conditions of employees working from home decreased, and there were new physical and mental health problems. Lack of communication with coworkers, having a toddler at home, greater interruptions, increased junk food consumption and decreased physical exercise were all significant predictors of poorer physical and mental well-being.

Conclusion

The subject of employee mental health and well-being is becoming increasingly crucial in today's world. Academics, practitioners, and policymakers are all interested in knowing about how basic changes in when, where, and how we work in a rapidly changing environment with technological advancements affect employees' mental health and well-being. By reviewing the research on mental health and workplace trends, this paper advances the conversation on workplace mental health. Artificial intelligence and technology have undoubtedly revolutionised the way we work, but they also have negative impacts on employees. Technology has increased workload and work-related stress due to working from anywhere and at any time. This has also led to a culture of always being connected and available. Employees may feel pressured to respond to emails and messages outside of work hours, leading to increased stress and a feeling of being constantly "on." Reduction in face-to-face interaction has led to feelings of isolation and loneliness. Information overload, higher expectations from employees, and disturbed work-life balance are other negative aspects of technology. Similarly, working from home has become increasingly popular due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but it also has negative impacts on employees' mental health and well-being. Isolation and loneliness, blurred boundaries between work and personal life, lack of social interaction, increased workload, technical difficulties and distractions that come with being at home, such as children or pets. This makes it difficult for employees to focus on work and can lead to stress and anxiety.

Overall, while technology and working from home have many benefits, it is important to be aware of their potential negative impacts on employees' mental health and well-being. Employers can take steps to mitigate these impacts by promoting work-life balance, encouraging social interaction through virtual team-building activities, providing training on healthy work-from-home practices, providing training on healthy technology use, and creating a supportive and inclusive workplace culture.

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